

Ryan Padraig Kelly

Connemara based artist Shelly McDonnell's current work, exhibited at this year's Clifden Arts Week Festival 20th-30th September, depicts the landscape of Connemara. McDonnell describes this style of work as 'abstract Landscape painting.' She elucidates the process:

'The canvases are painted from memory, which inevitably communicates not an accurate depiction of a landscape but recalls the experience of being in and knowing a place. My work explores

the idea of memories being at once romantic and flawed.’[\[1\]](#)

This fragmentary recount of landscapes is evident in *Walking the Length of Aillebrack*. The viewer is able to grasp McDonnell’s vision (Aillebrack is a beach in Connemara) but, as she describes, it is not complete or accurate.

McDonnell’s abstract account of Aillebrack Beach focuses on shape, colour and distance. There is little emphasis on light source, sky or shadowing. We understand the size, colour and form of the beach. Most importantly we understand the point of view of the painting, McDonnell’s subjective view. We

are placed on the beach, not overlooking it from some elevated platform. This provides tangibility to our own experience of being on a beach. The painting allows the viewer this visceral interaction. All of this is constructed with McDonnell's adept use of six to seven different pigments.

McDonnell creates distance without a vanishing point, space without air and contiguity without realism.

I have compared McDonnell's work to Clyfford Still in the past and I posit that she has adopted elements of Colour Field painting in her 'abstract landscape paintings.' Colour Field paintings primarily use

solid colours applied in large expanses and is said to free colour 'from objective context and becomes the subject in itself.'[\[2\]](#)

Although McDonnell has not made the colour itself a subject, she uses alternative mediums to subvert the tradition of landscape painting.

McDonnell illustrates this further, 'I incorporate industrial gloss paint and stark contrast that remove the image from the traditional format of landscape painting.'[\[3\]](#) She

mixes 'deep base glosses' with oil paints applies it with 'large volume syringes' to create her desired effect.[\[4\]](#) She explains the use of the industrial paints as a way of

transforming landscape into a 'commodity' in our mass media driven world.

It is the manner in which McDonnell distributes paints on the canvas that comprises the disposition of the painting. The colours are independent of each other and so, therefore, function as their own subjects. There are two layers of colours, the raised industrial gloss paint and the base oil paint.

Without the industrial gloss paint there would be little to assess or critique. Without the base oil paint the industrial gloss could be understood as anything: a river, the rings of Saturn, a wave.

Naturally, the title of the painting aids our comprehension of the piece but does not restrict it. The tone, chrome and disparate yet connected relation of colours present a dual layer of McDonnell's memory: mindful of space, eidetic in colour.